

HAMMER TOES



WHAT ARE HAMMER TOES?

A hammer toe is a toe deformity, typically affecting the 2nd, 3rd and 4th toes of the foot, where the toe is bent downwards from the joint nearest the foot. Technically, if the toe is bent from both joints it is called a 'claw toe', or if it is bent from only the furthest joint, it is termed a 'mallet toe'. These terms are often used interchangeably but they all amount to meaning the same thing – the toe has a flexed appearance and is not straight when viewed from side-on.

WHAT CAUSES HAMMER TOES?

There are various reasons as to why some people develop hammer toes. They may be simply inherited i.e. they are simply part of who we are. Ill-fitting or insecure footwear, such as slip-ons, are a major contributory factor. Hammer toes may also arise from a muscular imbalance in the foot. As muscles tend to work together in pairs using opposing actions, if one muscle group overpowers another it may result in an imbalanced pull on the toes, forcing them into a deformed position.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Sometimes the patient feels a general pain in their toes or feet. However, the most common problems encountered with hammer toes are the formation of corns and callus on the prominent, elevated joint which often rubs against footwear. Lesions may also form at the tip of an affected toe, which is often pointed downwards and therefore subject to forces from the ground when walking.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

If the hammer toes have not been present for a long time, and the toe is still flexible, then silicone devices aimed at straightening the toe may help. You could try some gentle stretching and strengthening toe exercises as directed by your podiatrist. It may be suggested that you revise your choice of footwear as this could be hastening the development of the problem.

Hammer toes, given time, will eventually become fixed due to joint and ligament changes. When this happens the only permanent solution will be surgery to help straighten the toe. This assumes, of course, that the toe is causing problems. However, many people live with hammer toes and suffer no problems. It is, therefore, important to weigh up the pros and cons of having surgery – your podiatrist will help guide you on this.

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about the problem with your foot. This leaflet is not a substitute for professional medical advice and should be used in conjunction with verbal information and treatment given.